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Outside the city's wall

In response to Walter Gershon's review of *Art's Way Out*

John Baldacchino

Art's Way Out invites readers to examine how what we call “art” enters a conditioned relationship with the polity that leaves the occasion of education and the condition of culture in a quandary that is at best inept and at worse oppressive. There are two reasons for this: (a) because any relationship between art and education is aporetic by dint of how they have emerged in between their respective autonomous and heteronomous forms of being and knowing; and (b) because in the volatility of representation, any cultural and educational conditioning is bound to vacillate between the same teleological states by which expressions of a political objective find themselves bookended by fascism (See Baldacchino 2012, pp. 3ff; Rose 1997, pp. 53-54).

This is often overlooked by the constructivist expectations that are commonly invested in art and education. Moreover, any crossing of art with philosophy is bound to fall foul of the excessive desires that we project on them. This has nothing to do with a failure to see or acknowledge art and philosophy's distinct specificity and forms of legitimation. Rather it has to do with the political framework within which discourses on art have emerged, particularly when education and culture are being increasingly identified with the so-called *knowledge* and *creative industries*.

Unlearning what we call “art”

As I have commented in a footnote (which is easily missed) on page 60, to speak of art and what “it” mediates, requires that one is mindful of the fact that art is made by someone. In the expectations that we invest in art we must always be careful not to project our desires for immanence onto an object we call a “work of art”. Likewise, one cannot forget that when philosophers like Georg Lukács (1971; 1974; 1975) endow art's *speciality* with the fullness of men and women's teleological projects, this must be considered from within the same context of specificity by which we mediate the world.

What we call “art” invariably emerges in all its teleological expectations. This is an obstacle that artists always seek to unlearn. Unlearning has been staple to art practice and more so its pedagogies long before theorists and social scientists adopted unlearning as a concept in post-colonial, race, gender and social theory. It is important to disambiguate the use of this term in art, because in the studio unlearning prompts a recurring point of departure by which artists unlearn what is meant or expected to be “art”, and by implication refute the fallacy of any future re-learning, as found in educational and social theory.¹

“A savage place”

Art's Way Out is a book of practice that corroborates Adorno's correct admonitions when he cites disdainfully all those *practicists* who keep themselves busy by thinking that the empirical

¹ Since *Art's Way Out* was published in 2012, I have published several long papers in this and other journals expanding on this problematic state of affairs. See Baldacchino 2014; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c.

assumptions of practice would suffice. (Adorno 2000, p. 6) Mindful of this risk, this book's proposal of practice is intrinsically bound to what is customarily assumed to be "art-making"—which, as a term, remains vulnerable to the instrumental contexts of other layers of practicism that cloak schools, museums, and any other institution with the myth of art's usefulness

The claim that one can *philosophize* art should raise eyebrows as it prompts the same impatience that one nurtures towards those proselytes who think that truth is secured by the three graces of art, education, and philosophy. One cannot ignore the audacity by which art and philosophy consciously cross each other's paths at some risk. Citing once more Adorno the atonal composer and the student of no less a master of modernity than Alban Berg, one could only imagine how he must have felt when in his desire to follow his calling as a composer he found himself writing philosophy. (See Stefan Muller-Doohm 2005)

Beyond those prerogatives traded by artists and philosophers, in such crossroads one cannot fail to recognize the all too familiar chasm of which Coleridge (another poet turned philosopher) hails as "that deep romantic chasm which slanted / Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover." The poet of *Kubla Khan* reminds us that this is "a savage place", though equally "holy and enchanted." (1997, p. 249)

To claim art as a way out of the predicament of its own double bind (by reasserting the same bind as a strategy for exiting the parameters that make it) is to attempt to explain the non-spaces of a *khôra* and the eternal feeling of a *mis-en-abyme*. As a mirror within mirrors this state of affairs does not speak only twice as Rancière (2009) suggests with regards to art and aesthetics, but in innumerable ways.

As such, the venture is posed eternally on the threshold of Zarathustra's gate of the Moment (Nietzsche 1974, p. 78), and by implication its case could never find comfort in the hope of emancipation as a neutered *différend*. The gate is an entrance by which we exit the same polis that incarcerates us by the promise of irenic happiness. As art reveals this state of affairs and its irony shows disdain towards learning by disestablishing the benignity of such promises, we begin to realize that the triangulated space of the good, the true and the beautiful must be seen for what it is: a cultural condition purporting a *strength* that leaves no hope for kenotic autonomy.

Una festa di passaggio

But before one gives up on the attempt to move away from the shyster's tricky delusion (Baldacchino 2012 pp. 161-162; Adorno 1990, p. 198) of a sociology of knowledge by which we are all too often mesmerized and expected to articulate a future (revolutionary) metaphysics, *Art's Way Out* goes on to suggest that rather than wear a Che Guevara T-Shirt and blindly believe the cosmopolitan certainties promised in the school and the gallery, we hold back and consider the gift of a *festa di passaggio*, a passing fête that through irony and comedy enables our anger towards cruel absolutes like the holocaust—as both Roberto Benigni and Dario Fo have done in their work.

This is possible because as the *fautori*, as sustainers, of art, we could safely take a distance from the expected rhythms of the discursive parroting that plagues the institutionalized realms of knowledge and culture. In this safety we would partake of a kenotic approach where grounds turn into horizons and where weak art is one of many attempts by which we make some sense of the world.

While I agree with the reviewer when he reminds us that the class clown's "neither-nor ludic act rarely changes even the most local of classroom practices and tends to be used as tool for the further othering of already marginalized students," I should emphasize that I have no interest in education's busy bodying narratives of ill-founded happiness. I would like to think that the reason for refusing to speak of classrooms is clearly set from the start.

The reaction by which one attempts to halt the constructivist millenarians who have coopted schools, galleries, museums, studios, academies, and anything they could control into the Establishment, is understandable. However what seems to have become an inverse attempt by progressive, liberal and critical educators to gain progress by the same means with which conservatives have stultified education, remains alien to what art's unlearning represents.

Here rests my excuse for my overt emphasis on what appears to be a scopocentric exemplification, about which the reviewer raises a legitimate question. The choice was conscious by dint of its selective limitations. My attempt to bring in other forms of artistic labor that would suggest other forms of representation—aural as well as tactile—might appear to remain within the same scopic limits of a political milieu that is willfully contested. However this is inevitable because (a) the immutable assumptions of art, as expressed aesthetically, ethically and ontologically, remain and retain—for worse, more than for better—the purview of such an imposition; (b) because the political assumptions under examination are what they are; and (c) because while we think that we have broken loose from both (a) and (b) by rightly assuming (or desiring) to be less Occidental (which is not necessarily white, male and Eurocentric) our artistic, political and educational labors are invariably reduced to nothing more than a form of reversed Orientalism.

In my attempt to articulate my choices (for which I make no apologies), I found my commentary catapulted towards the teleological ends by which this assumption has been historically conditioned. This was always intentional as my attention to Gianni Vattimo, Dario Fo, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Antoni Tàpies and others is no less marked by a conscious choice of those artistic labors whose *duende* never fails to lure us into the sour smell of baby's spittle. (Lorca 1996, p. 162) As Lorca's poetics further confirms, this represents, time and again, the gate of that recurring Moment by which a lull or indeed an impasse, comes to signify the *necessarily contingent*—or better put, the kenosis of unknowing (in John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila), empathy (in Edith Stein), and weakness (in Gianni Vattimo).

With this in mind I turn to childhood as a metaphysics where the ludic returns to the *paese dei balocchi*, to toyland, and like Pinocchio (notwithstanding Agamben) we all become *asini* that realize themselves in their temporary loss of a perceived humanity. My attention to childhood in the works of De Chirico, Henri Rousseau and Carlo Carrà moves beyond the Occidental canon to which they belong, where by dint of the same canonicity a meaning of irrefutable impossibility

becomes a powerful moment that is recalled at the very moment when an innocent child asks: “Mum, what is innocence?”

To this effect, in *Art's Way Out*, as in the works that I have written following it, I tried to do with art what the implement of other than art cannot do. This is what education and politics continuously attempt by the very dint of their existence as human acts, even when in their attempt to use art as a form of emancipation or inclusion, human beings find themselves excluded and oppressed by fellow *asini* in toyland's perpetual polity.

Art's travesty

In art's travesty one looks for the root of many other travesties. But at the same time one is also expected to stop from universalizing the peculiarity that throws art into the abyss of its willed refutations. This is why I would be disinclined to include what the reviewer collates as “indigenous art, non-Western ‘low’ art, ... craft.” My exclusion comes from an unwillingness to assume these human deeds collectively under the umbrella of what we call “art” as to do so would amount to reverse Orientalism.

I could probably explain this by recalling Kant's assumption of a possible purpose without purposiveness, as it carries the impossibility of judgment, which in his Third Critique lives on borrowed time. Away from aesthetics and closer to how we do art in all its travesties, judgment must be seen for what it is: a mere philosophical convenience adopted by those who cannot assume a world outside the fence of grammatical legitimation where particulars have to respond to universals. Yet the Third Critique forfeits such a desire in his *Analytic of the Sublime*. This reconfirms Kant's genius, as it becomes evident that grammatical legitimation is nonsense. (And I refuse to accept that Kant had no sense of humor).

By way of concluding, let us remind ourselves of the *aporia* by which art must always be unlearned: Any attempt to forego the tautology of “art as art” leaves us with no choice but to unlearn the same pedagogical thinking and practices that are claimed through art and with them all that is assumed to be artistic. Failing to accept such a state of affairs amounts to the perpetuated illusion that art, like education and philosophy, are somewhat necessary.

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